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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003595

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SUBJECT: LEE MYUNG-BAK'S FOREIGN POLICY TEAM: PRESIDENT LEE EQUALS STRONGER U.S.-ROK ALLIANCE

REF: SEOUL 3581

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: In a December 24 meeting with President-elect Lee Myung-bak's foreign policy advisors, the Ambassador discussed the alliance, North Korea, Iraq troop extension, the KORUS FTA, Lee's first trip to the U.S., and the Visa Waiver Program (VWP). The team was optimistic that, under President Lee, the U.S.-ROK alliance would improve, the KORUS FTA would be ratified eventually, and a Lee administration would be easier to work with than the current administration. Former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-ha told the Ambassador that if there were significant deliverables at an initial U.S.-ROK summit, Lee would be willing to go to Washington in March, although others thought a visit in April (after the 4/9 National Assembly election) might be more realistic. END SUMMARY.

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OPCON Transfer and Troop Reductions  
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¶12. (C) In a December 24 meeting with Lee Myung-bak's top foreign policy advisors, former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-ha, Representative Park Jin and former Ambassador Kwon Jong-rak, the Ambassador said that the U.S. was convinced that the decision to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) in 2012 was good for the alliance, and we wanted to avoid any disagreement with the Lee Administration on this. It made sense for today's Korea to assume primary responsibility for its own defense, even though we did not like President Roh's characterization of the move as it's a "recovery of sovereignty." Representative Park said that President-elect Lee Myung-bak would respect the decision to transfer OPCON, but would prefer to condition the time schedule on the security situation in Northeast Asia, especially if North Korea did not denuclearize. The Ambassador said we had agreed to a five- (vice three) year transition period, in part, to reassure conservatives in the ROK. He pointed out that the agreement allowed for reviewing and assessing progress during the implementation period, and that changes in the security environment, such as the North Korean nuclear weapons threat, could be taken into account.

¶13. (C) Former Foreign Minister Yoo Chong-ha asked if it was true that U.S. troops could not serve under a foreign commander. The Ambassador said that was the guiding

principle, but he noted that, even under the current Combined Forces Command (CFC) structure, U.S. ground troops reported to the Korean Deputy CFC Commander in wartime, since he then reported to General Bell. Yoo said it was important to harmonize command and control in case of a North Korean attack. Since in such a scenario, the ensuing war would likely not be confined to the peninsula and could be regional, it was important to look into how such a war could be managed with a dual command. The Ambassador responded that thinking of the future U.S. and ROK commands as separate was misleading since overall operations and war planning would still be combined, and we would continue to train and exercise together. The two countries' air forces would look at the same information and the same targeting data. When president-elect Lee visits CFC headquarters in Yongsan, he could receive a briefing from General Bell and understand this better. Park and Yoo noted that it had not been decided if Lee would visit CFC before the inauguration or if he would invite General Bell to make a courtesy call on Lee in his transition offices near the Blue House.

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Zaytun Extension and Broader Alliance Cooperation  
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¶4. (C) Yoo said that Lee supported a positive decision to keep ROK's Zaytun deployment in Iraq into 2009. Currently, ROK companies were seeking to seal deals to develop energy resources in Kurdistan; one deal has been signed and two others were in the works. Successful economic deals would provide a "pragmatic" reason for the ROK to keep troops in Iraq so Lee could claim that the deployment was not just "for the U.S. but for the ROK's interests." Park said that the Zaytun deployment extension would likely pass the National

Assembly December 27 or 28 despite heavy opposition from members of the United New Democratic Party (UNDP).

¶5. (C) The Ambassador said that we welcomed President-elect Lee's strong commitment to the alliance and his comments about expanding global engagement with the U.S. We would want to use the first high-level meetings after the inauguration to demonstrate the importance and vitality of the alliance. He recalled that Defense Secretary Gates, during the November SCM, had suggested a new review of the alliance and its mission, since the previous effort had produced mixed results because of differences with the current ROK administration in assessing the strategic environment. Perhaps in the Lee administration, further progress could be made in defining a new "vision" for the alliance and promoting closer defense cooperation among the U.S., ROK and Japan (and perhaps Australia as well). Also, perhaps after the April 9 National Assembly elections, the ROK could look again at expanding its role in Afghanistan and work more closely with NATO to control the Taliban.

¶6. (C) Former FM Yoo said that Lee Myung-bak wanted to take early steps to revitalize the alliance. Lee would welcome U.S. steps that demonstrated that it was committed to the ROK's security for the long haul, such as a signal that there would be no additional drawdowns of U.S. troops Rep. Park explained that, despite the trauma of the hostage crisis in Afghanistan in August, the ROK was still committed to peace and playing a role in the war on terror. Also, Park said, Lee was critical of NIS Chief Kim Man-bok's role in negotiating directly with the Taliban to secure the release of the Korean hostages.

¶7. (C) Yoo said that Lee Myung-bak and the U.S. should work together to show the utility of the alliance to young people. People in their 20s and early 30s did not know how much the U.S. did to help Korea become the country it is today. Therefore, Lee hoped to do something with young people on his first trip to the U.S. To help increase awareness, Korea and the U.S. should expand efforts to reach out and also increase exchange programs at all levels and ages. One idea that could contribute greatly to these efforts would be implementing a 12-month working visa for students such as the

U.S. and Australia recently agreed to put in place. FM Yoo also suggested that internships for Koreans in U.S. local government would be helpful since local governments, in the future, would have increasingly more influence in Korea.

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Six Party Talks  
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¶ 8. (C) Kwon, concerned by recent press reports, asked if there had been progress in the Six Party Talks. The Ambassador said that the head of the Korea Desk, Sung Kim, had just returned from North Korea and reported that the disablement of Yongbyon was on track, but North Korea had still not committed to providing a complete declaration; they still had not agreed to acknowledge past uranium enrichment and proliferation activities. Kwon said he had heard there was resistance in North Korea to dismantling the cooling tower and disposing of the fuel rods at Yongbyon. The Ambassador said he understood this was progressing as expected, although the DPRK might sell the fuel rods rather than disable them. Kwon said that the U.S. and the ROK should be prepared for increased tension with North Korea in January and February if the Six Party Talks became deadlocked. Tension between the North and South was common at the beginning of a new president's term.

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FTA/Beef  
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¶ 9. (C) The Ambassador said we hoped the ROK could make progress on ratifying the KORUS FTA and reopening the beef market before the inauguration; we hoped the GNP would promote bipartisan cooperation on these issues during the transition period. Rep. Park said the GNP should take the initiative to try to ratify the FTA, but it could be difficult in view of the April 9 National Assembly elections. Yoo echoed this skepticism and said that a more realistic goal should not be ratification of the FTA but rather resolving the beef issue before inauguration.

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Visa Waiver Program  
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¶ 10. (C) Park asked if Korea would be able to enter the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) soon. The Ambassador said there would be an experts meeting in January. While the remaining issues were largely technical, it could take until the beginning of 2009 to put in place the security procedures required by the new U.S. legislation. Nevertheless, The Embassy and A/S Hill were trying the speed things up as much as possible.

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Transition Period  
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¶ 11. (C) Yoo said that, unlike in the U.S., the transition team did not establish offices in each ministry. Instead, there would be one central office and ministry representatives should come to brief the transition team at the office near the Blue House. This arrangement reflected the relative strength of the transition team compared to the ministries. After the presidential secretariat was named, power would then shift from the transition team to the secretariat.

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¶ 12. (C) FM Yoo said that since the UNDP still controlled the National Assembly, the strategy for nominating a Prime Minister would be to float several names, gauge reaction, and then nominate someone who would cause little confrontation. Park agreed the first PM should be non-controversial because of the liberals' control of the Assembly until after the April election.

¶13. (C) The Ambassador said that press reports that a DAS-level team would travel to Korea in January to meet Lee and his transition team were unsubstantiated. For now, there were no current plans to send such a high-profile team to Korea. But we did expect that A/S Hill and other USG officials would be coming to Korea on normal business, and they could meet transition team officials informally. Yoo said that, since Japan was planning to send a "big figure" to visit Korea before Lee's inauguration and Lee's team would reciprocate, creating big headlines, visitors from the U.S. could easily keep a low profile while in Seoul. The Ambassador also noted that reports that President Bush would invite Lee to Camp David were rumors, because the White House had not made any decisions yet.

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Inauguration  
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¶14. (C) Yoo asked if Secretary Rice would attend the February 25 inauguration. The Ambassador said that the Secretary had prior commitments to accompany the President on

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a trip to Africa. FM Yoo said while it was unfortunate Secretary Rice could not attend, if the delegation were led

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by someone like former President Bush and included the Secretary of Treasury or Commerce, it would be viewed very

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positively by the South Korean public. The Treasury Secretary would be especially appropriate given Lee's

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emphasis on the economy.

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Summit  
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¶15. (C) Rep. Park said a visit by President Lee to Washington before the April 9 elections might be difficult. However, Yoo said that was in principle true, but if Lee could go to the U.S. in March and return with tangible results, an earlier trip to the U.S. was possible. Kwon said an announcement to maintain U.S. troop levels in Korea, a date-certain for Korea's entry into VWP and expansion of exchange programs would be significant deliverables that Lee would hope to achieve from a summit.

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Comment  
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¶16. (C) The three advisors seemed very confident and at ease with their respective roles. They all have carved out a place for themselves in the Lee transition -- Yoo the wise man, Kwon a bureaucrat who gets things done, and Park who provides some political perspective -- and they all seem set to play significant roles in the Lee Administration. On December 26, Park Jin was named the head of the transition's foreign policy team, putting him in pole position for the top job at MOFAT or the Chairman of the Unification, Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee. The three echoed President-elect Lee's December 20 message to the Ambassador (reftel), saying a Lee administration would put a high priority on improving relations with the U.S. Our contacts with Lee and all his advisors have convinced us that this is quite sincere.

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